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SUBJECT: KEY NATIONAL ASSEMBLY STAFFERS ON IRAN, AFGHANISTAN
Summary

11. (SBU) Three key National Assembly (NA) foreign policy staffers told us that the South Korean business community has been pressing the Blue House and key lawmakers to expand the ROK's economic ties with Iran, and other countries in the Middle East, and to be more aggressive in helping secure big-ticket construction projects in the region for ROK companies. They related that Democratic Party lawmaker Song Min-soon, a former foreign minister, would host a Korea-Arab conference in December to explore ways to boost ROK cultural and economic ties with major countries in the Middle East. All of our interlocutors agreed there is bipartisan support for continued and possibly expanded ROK participation in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. End summary.

Key National Assembly Foreign Policy Staffers -----

12. (SBU) During a recent visit to the ROK National Assembly (NA), poloffs met with three key foreign policy staffers to get their views on the state of the ROK's relations with Iran and check on prospects for NA authorization of a possible ROK troop deployment to Afghanistan. Our interlocutors were:

-- Song Chang-wook, Chief of Staff for former ROK Foreign Minister and Democratic Party (DP) lawmaker Song Min-soon;

-- Jang Yeong-il, Chief of Staff for Kim Hak-song, Grand National Party (GNP) Chairman of the National Defense Committee (NDC); and,

-- Gu Hee-kwon, Head of the NA Foreign Affairs Committee's professional staff.

Iran: Two-Track Approach -----

13. (SBU) Noting up front that ROK foreign policy in the Middle East gets little attention in the NA, Jang Yeong-il explained that the GNP strives to divide the ROK's relations with Iran into two separate tracks, one economic and the other political. Echoing what we have heard from other interlocutors (reftel), he said the South Korean business community has been pressing the Blue House and key lawmakers to expand the ROK's economic ties with Iran, and other countries in the Middle East, and to be more aggressive in helping secure big-ticket construction projects for ROK companies. In the political track, Jang said, the ROK tries to "be multilateral," working with like-minded countries on issues like Iran's nuclear program and poor human rights record.

14. (SBU) Song Chang-wook indicated that the trend is for the ROK to expand ties with Iran and major Arab states, not curb

them. He said, for example, that his boss would host a Korea-Arab conference in December to explore ways to boost cultural and economic ties between the ROK and major countries in the Middle East.

Troops to Afghanistan

15. (SBU) All of our interlocutors agreed that, at present, there is bipartisan support for continued and possibly expanded ROK participation in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. Gu Hee-kwon noted the Blue House has not yet approached the NA about sending soldiers to Afghanistan, something President Lee pledged to do during his June summit with President Obama. A key point of contention between the GNP and DP, however, is whether the Blue House should be able to dispatch more troops for such missions without prior NA approval.

TOKOLA